

Scenes from the Past...

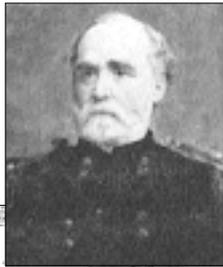


courtesy—Kelsey & Associates Private Collection

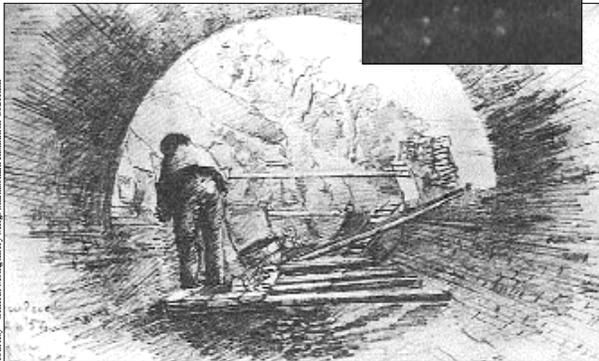
In many aspects, the development of early Washington was shaped by its natural physical boundaries. One of the most challenging has been the deep gorge that is Rock Creek. For many decades after the city was laid out in 1792, it served as a barrier for expansion, especially to the north of Dupont Circle. Since Georgetown had preceded Washington City in establishment, and Rock Creek gorge was at a manageable depth along M Street and Pennsylvania Avenue at 23rd Street, it had one of the first overpasses to be constructed—M Street originally being coined Bridge Street, for obvious reasons.

The 1870s image shown above captures the earliest Pennsylvania Avenue bridges with what was then a novel and welcome addition to the city: large, arched pipes of the Washington Aqueduct System that actually supported the bridge itself. Construction of the aqueduct was started in 1852 and completed a little over 10 years later, with the water piped to this location originating from Great Falls in massive, brick-lined tubes that still rest under MacArthur Boulevard today, then known as Conduit Road.

The aqueduct system was designed by “Renaissance-man” General C. Montgomery Meigs, who is pictured here, along with his own sketch of the brick-lined tubes. He was an accomplished engineer, Civil War strategist, watercolor artist, and architect, who went on to design the oversized Pension Building, known today as the National Building Museum. With a reliable and



courtesy—Smithsonian Institution



courtesy—General Montgomery Meigs Smithsonian Institution Collection

purpose water system, the health and well-being of Washington residents improved dramatically. Interestingly, the Pennsylvania Avenue Bridge of today still contains Meigs’ aqueduct system, albeit concealed under a modern stone facade.

An 1880s photograph of the original P Street bridge, seen in the image, below, shows the open, horse-drawn Metropolitan Railroad cars utilizing the bridge for commuting



courtesy—Washingtonian Division, MIA Library

purposes. Land owners and real estate speculators often lobbied Congress and the city government to build such bridges, making their holdings on the other side of Rock Creek much more valuable once a bridge was erected. Congress passed the Rock Creek Park Act in 1890, protecting the wilderness below.

So what did Washingtonians do shortly after the turn of the 19th century when there was no bridge to cross over the gorge to such suburbs as Cleveland and Woodley Parks? They made their way down steep embankments on either side, and simply forded their way directly through Rock Creek itself, as illustrated below.

If you were too young to drive, as this youngster was, apparently one just waited to



courtesy—Kelsey & Associates Private Collection

catch a ride on the next passing car.

As cars became larger and technology improved, many of the older bridges that spanned the park needed to be replaced. The dramatic, 1941 photograph captured both the old and the new Massachusetts Avenue bridges coexisting for a brief moment



courtesy—Washingtonian Division, MIA Library

in time. After the new bridge had been built above the old one, workers busily utilized dynamite to blast away at the old, arched stone bridge while cars precariously traveled beneath.

—Paul Kelsey Williams
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A NOTE ABOUT A CHANGE

Starting in April, readers will have noticed a new byline. It is that of Paul Williams, who has been reporting on historic preservation and historic district developments in this newspaper for several years. He has now assumed the pen so ably wielded for nearly 15 years by Jack Brewer, the knowledgeable Library Assistant at the Historical Society of Washington.

This change has come about largely because over these many years in producing approximately 175 of these features, we have effectively exhausted the Society’s archive of images pertaining to the part of the city about which we report. We cannot say strongly enough how grateful we have been for the many years of unstinting cooperation accorded us by the personnel of the Society and for their graciousness in assigning this task to Jack Brewer. His contributions to this series has resulted in thousands upon thousands of our readers learning about their community. The Society has thus clearly enhanced its educational mission as a result, and our readers have been the beneficiaries, as will countless researches in the years to come.